

USDA, FDA Urged to Act Immediately to Protect Americans from Mad Cow Disease

April 13, 2001

Fourteen animal welfare, consumer, farming, environmental, and public health groups have called on Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman and Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson to take immediate action to protect Americans from Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or "mad cow disease." Groups throughout the country joined together in a letter to the two Bush cabinet officials, expressing the widespread concern that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) are not doing nearly enough to prevent an outbreak of BSE in the United States. The letter recommends seven areas for urgent action:

Rod Leonard of the Community Nutrition Institute, on processed meat ingredients from "mechanical deboning" and "advanced meat recovery":

"No parent would intentionally choose to feed their children the ground-up bones, nerve fibers, and connective tissue found in mechanically deboned meat. But this product is used in some hot dogs, bologna and other processed meats, even though it could contain ground-up spinal cord. The European Union has already banned these products as a precautionary action, and the USDA should do the same."

Gene Bauston of Farm Sanctuary, on "downer" cows:

"The marketing of cows who are too sick to walk, so called 'downers', should be prohibited. Not only is this practice cruel, but it poses a threat to human health. In fact, some evidence suggests that downed cows may harbor a variant of mad cow disease. Downed animals should be humanely euthanized, and then tested for mad cow disease."

Dr. Samuel Epstein, professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health and chair of the Cancer Prevention Coalition, on dietary supplements:

"Dietary supplements are not adequately regulated by FDA and may pose a significant threat to consumers. Right now, an unscrupulous manufacturer could literally take a British cow brain and use it as an ingredient in a dietary supplement sold in the U.S."

Christine Stevens of the Animal Welfare Institute, on the spread of BSE through feed containing remains of BSE-infected cattle:

"The reign of agribusiness in Britain is at the root of the outbreak of BSE which has now spread

throughout the European Union. Sweden passed – and enforced – strict legislation on animal feed in the 1980's that has protected its animals and therefore its people. The U.S. should follow the Swedish example."

Sue Jarrett, a rancher from Colorado and a consultant with Global Resource Action Center for the Environment, on the challenges for small-scale cattle producers:

"For six months, I tried to get my suppliers to certify that their feed did not contain bone meal or rendered material from cattle. When they couldn't assure me that cattle protein wasn't mixed in, I quit using their feed. We need to remember that cows are not meant to eat cows or other animals."

Skip Waters, a rancher from Wyoming and spokesperson for the Western Organization of Resource Councils, on weak regulation and inadequate resources for enforcement on livestock imports:

"Public health and safety should come first, before corporate profits and trade. We need to have adequate safeguards to see that we don't import a potentially serious health and economic problem."

Felicia Nestor of the Government Accountability Project, on inadequate testing for BSE:

"The government must demonstrate that its field personnel are trained, well-equipped, and well-positioned, and they are doing sufficient testing of high-risk animals in every state to protect the public from this terrifying disease."


Steve Suppan of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, on the effect of trade policy on the U.S.' ability to prevent mad cow disease:

"U.S. support for World Trade Organization-recognized guidelines to declare foreign food inspection systems 'equivalent' to our system is very troubling. Put simply, a national system with strong BSE prevention measures could be declared 'equivalent' to another nation's system that lacks such protections. The USDA's own Inspector General has issued scathing criticisms of the USDA's process for determining equivalency."

"Mad cow disease is a frightening example of the health threats posed by an industrialized food system," says Wenonah Hauter of Public Citizen. "The U.S. government must act immediately on the recommendations made by these organizations which represent a broad spectrum of the public."

The full letter to the FDA and USDA can be seen at <http://www.citizen.org/cmep/rad-food/bse/lettertofdausda.htm>

The letter was signed by Animal Welfare Institute, Cancer Prevention Coalition, Center for Food Safety, Community Nutrition Institute, Family Farm Defenders, Farm Sanctuary, Global Resource Action Center for the Environment, Government Accountability Project, Humane Farming Association, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, National Family Farm Coalition, Organic Consumers Association, Public Citizen, and the U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

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